

## Decision Memo

### Big Creek-Pearl Hazardous Fuels Reduction

USDA Forest Service  
Parks Ranger District, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests  
Jackson County, Colorado  
T.11 & 12N., R.82 & 83W.

Historical logging, years of fire suppression, and lack of recent vegetation management on National Forest lands adjacent to and surrounding the private land in-holdings in the Big Creek-Pearl area have resulted in forest conditions that have a high risk of uncontrollable, high intensity fires occurring. The 2002 Jackson County Wildland Fire and Fuels Management Plan identified the Big Creek-Pearl area as a community at risk where vegetation treatments on Federal and private lands should be implemented to reduce the current risk to private land and structures from future wildfires. Based on this and direction provided by the National Fire Plan, Healthy Forest Initiative, and the Routt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Revision (Forest Plan), an analysis of the area has found that a number of vegetation treatments could be used to reduce fuels on forested and non-forested National Forest System (NFS) lands that surround a number of permitted cabins or are adjacent to area private land and structures.

**Under the Proposed Action, it is my decision to use a combination of tree thinning and prescribed burning on 309 acres to decrease fuel quantity and continuity, lessen fire behavior and intensities, and create defensible space between wildlands and rural home-sites in the Big Creek-Pearl vicinity.**

### Background

The Big Creek-Pearl project area is located in Jackson County, Colorado approximately 20 miles northwest of Walden, Colorado, and 15 miles west of Cowdrey, Colorado. The main route into the area is off Colorado Highway 125 at the small town of Cowdrey, Colorado, and then west on Jackson County Road 6W to National Forest System Roads (NFSRs) 80 and 600. There are approximately 556 acres of private land in the area. Much of the private land within the analysis area is currently undeveloped. The exceptions to this are the scattered private in-holdings between the old town-site of Pearl and the Forest's eastern boundary west along the South Fork of Big Creek and the NFSR 600 corridor to Big Creek Lakes, where there are a number of small ranches and cabins that have been built over the years. It is also in this same area that there are a number of permitted cabins on National Forest system lands.

The project area provides a variety of year-round recreational opportunities. Along with high use during hunting season, major recreational uses include auto touring, dispersed camping, camping in developed sites, hiking, backpacking, ATV/ORV use, and personal use firewood cutting. NFSR 80 (Stateline Road) crosses the area from east to west, and is used to access the Hog Park area by many forest users. Big Creek Lakes Campground, which is accessed via NFSR 600, is situated within the southern part of the analysis area, along with a number of trailheads leading into Mount Zirkel Wilderness area. The NFSR 600 corridor has a number of dispersed campsites. Snowmobiling is the main winter activity in the area, with access off County Road 6W where Jackson County stops plowing.

## Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action approximately 309 acres of mechanical and prescribed fire vegetation treatments have been identified for both non-forested and forested areas to reduce the amount and continuity of existing fuels, to decrease the potential for, and decrease the resistance to control of a wildfire if it were to occur in the Big Creek-Pearl vicinity. Specifically, the fuel treatments are designed to limit fire behavior to surface fuels in these areas, thereby allowing direct attack by hand crews, mechanical equipment, and/or aerial retardant. Having objectives for both decreasing hazardous fuels and maintaining and promoting fire dependent plant communities, a number of aspen stands have been identified for mechanical treatments to set back subalpine fir encroachment. Silvicultural treatments include: thinning, roller chopping, strip piling, and prescribed burning (See **Table 1** and **Figure 1**).

It is anticipated that no new specified road construction or reconstruction will be needed for this proposal. The existing two-track road system and a minimal amount of temporary roads will be needed to provide adequate access to specific treatment units. All new and reconstructed temporary roads used for this proposal will be closed (obliterated) following completion of the project. Some specific treatment units will require the adjacent private landowners' permission and granting of a permanent or temporary access permit to the Forest Service to be implemented. Other associated treatments include the designation of commercial and personal use Christmas tree/firewood areas along the NFSR 600 corridor. Consideration will be given to using a small commercial post & pole timber sale to treat some of the units. It is expected that this proposal will take 2 to 3 years to accomplish and would be completed primarily through non-commercial service contracts. All slash pile and broadcast burning will be done by qualified personnel identified in the Burn Plan.

**Table 1.** Big Creek-Pearl Hazardous Fuels Proposed Action Summary

<b>Fuels Treatment</b>	<b>Slash Treatment</b>	<b>Est. Total Acres</b>
Thinning	Pile Slash & Burn Chip Slash (Campground)	90
Rollerchop	Broadcast Burn	32
Thinning/Aspen Enhancement	Pile Slash & Burn Under-Burn Aspen	112
Strip Pile	Pile Slash & Burn	56
Aspen Burn	Broadcast Burn	19
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>309 ACRES</b>

## **Description of Hazardous Fuels Prescriptions and Slash Treatments:**

**Thinning** – Proposed thinning (timber harvest) would be used to reduce tree densities and improve stand health in these post & pole size lodgepole pine stands. Thinning would be estimated at 35-50% removal, depending on stand condition. If commercially treated, whole tree skidding/yarding would occur, essentially removing the tops and limbs of harvested trees from the unit. If the unit is non-commercially treated, the slash will be hand piled. Slash piles created by the treatment would be burned in late fall or during the winter when there is adequate snow. One thinning unit that is situated directly to the east of Big Creek Lakes Campground would have the slash chipped within 100' of the campground road. See Figure 1.

**Roller Chopping** - The intent of this treatment is to use some type of mastication (i.e., mowing, roller chopping) within this highly suppressed, “dog hair” stand of lodgepole pine. The area would then be broadcast burned. Treatment would also provide for regeneration of a new stand that could potentially be managed into the future to promote a fire safe and silvicultural acceptable condition. See Figure 1.

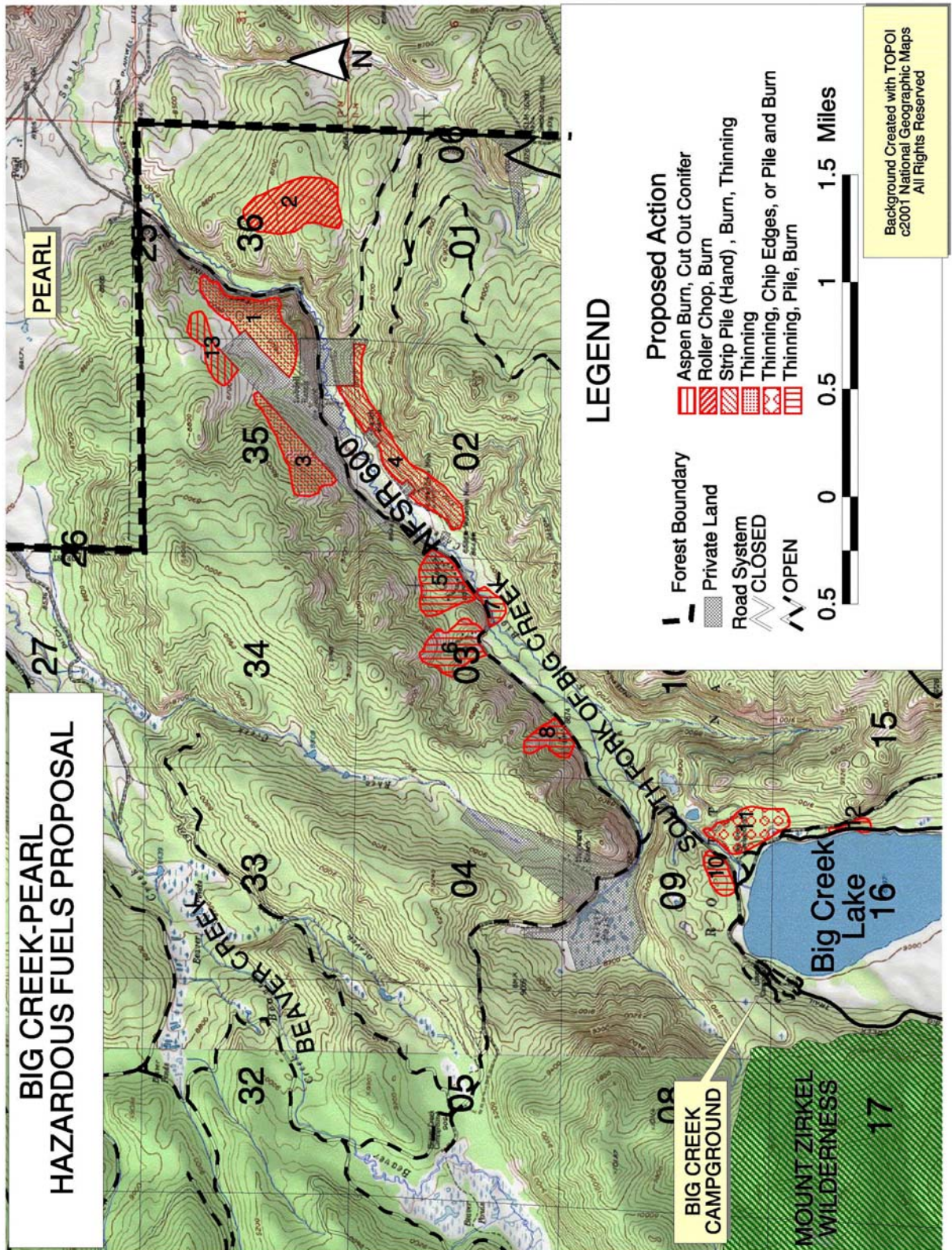
**Thinning/Aspen Enhancement** – Thinning would be used to reduce tree densities and improve stand health in the portion of these stands that is dominated by post & pole size lodgepole pine. Thinning would be estimated at 35-50% removal, depending on stand condition. If commercially treated, whole tree skidding/yarding would occur, essentially removing the tops and limbs of harvested trees from the unit. If the unit is non-commercially treated, the slash will be hand piled. Slash piles created by the treatment would be burned in late fall or during the winter when there is adequate snow. The aspen portion of these units is primarily small decadent or suppressed aspen. The aspen component has significant dead and down with encroaching ground juniper. The aspen would be broadcast burned. The burning will reduce fuel quantity and stimulate aspen regeneration and sprouting. Aspen is often considered a “living fire line” and is often used as safety zones and fire line during fire suppression operations. See Figure 1.

**Strip Pile** – This treatment is proposed for post and pole size lodgepole pine with a significant component of dead and down. The proposed treatment is to hand pile all dead and down in four or five 100' wide strips that would alternate parallel to the slope. Piles would be disposed of through burning in the late fall and winter when there is adequate snow. See Figure 1.

**Aspen Burn** – This unit is primarily an aspen stand with encroaching conifer. The intent is to broadcast burn the area. Any small diameter (less than 5 inches dbh) conifer would be felled prior to burning. The felled conifer may be removed, piled and burned, or left to lie to assist in carrying the broadcast burn through the aspen stand. Results should reduce current fuel loading and stimulate aspen sprouting and regeneration. See Figure 1.



Figure 1 - Proposed Action



## **Environmental Measures and Monitoring**

In addition to Forest Plan standards and guidelines designed to mitigate adverse impacts, I have identified the following mitigation measures as being appropriate for the Big Creek-Pearl proposal. These design features will be applied to reduce or prevent undesirable effects resulting from management activities.

### ***Fisheries***

Restrict creation of slash piles near the forest edge next to streams, wet areas and ponds to 300 feet or greater.

### ***Visuals***

Revegetate slash sites with native seed mixture to blend with and the surrounding landscape.

Retain and protect healthy vegetation within FDR 600 corridor and Big Creek Lakes Campground to maintain scenery.

### ***Soils***

Burn piles will be limited to approximately 300 square feet. After the piles are burned, the site will be reseeded. The size limit will prevent excessive soil heating from the burn piles.

Use designated skid trails in units with heavy equipment use to minimize soil impacts and protect residual trees.

### ***Wildlife***

Known active and inactive raptor nests will be excluded from treatment units.

Fall burns will not be conducted on sagebrush areas containing bitterbrush. Bitterbrush acreages should be avoided.

### ***Heritage***

Project activities cannot occur in Unit 1 until SHPO concurrence is obtained. The rest of the proposal had received SHPO concurrence.

All persons associated with operations under this authorization must be informed that any objects or sites of cultural, paleontological, or scientific value such as historic or prehistoric resources, graves or grave markers, human remains, ruins, cabins, rock art, fossils, or artifacts shall not be damaged, destroyed, removed, moved, or disturbed. If in connection with operations under this authorization any of the above resources are encountered, the proponent shall immediately suspend all activities in the immediate vicinity of the discovery that might further disturb such materials and notify the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest authorized officer of the findings. The discovery must be protected until notified in writing to proceed by the authorized officer (36 CFR 800.110 & 112, 43 CFR 10.4).

### ***Recreation***

Construct a temporary timber sale road that would leave the campground from one of the administrative sites.

Schedule logging so that only one side of the campground and one boat ramp would have to be closed at any one time.

Haul logs during lower use time periods during the summer and fall (weekdays, and non-Holiday time periods).

Require flaggers for log traffic to warn people of on-coming log truck traffic and to stop large vehicles from meeting on the parts of the road that are only one lane wide.

### **Hydrology**

Limit heavy equipment use to slopes less than 40%.

No heavy equipment operation within 100 feet of kettle ponds, streams, wetlands and riparian areas.

Do not burn piles within 100 feet of kettle ponds, streams, wetlands and riparian areas.

Use designated skid trails when using heavy equipment. Waterbar and seed all skid trails after use, prior to fall rainy season.

### **Monitoring**

Monitoring is done to assure that Forest Plan standards and guidelines are being met and adhered to during project implementation. The following specific items were identified as needing monitoring during preparation and implementation of the fuels reduction treatments:

- High potential amphibian habitat will be surveyed prior to project implementation. This is needed to confirm presence or absence of amphibian species. If breeding sites are found and it is determined that project operations would negatively affect the site, then operations would cease in that area until site-specific mitigations can be implemented.
- Monitor treatment areas for nesting TES species such as northern goshawk. If an active nest is found, mitigation could entail either imposition of a seasonal restriction to protect the species from disturbance or habitat destruction; changes in timber marking (and included timber species or quantities) to protect or maintain existing habitat(s); or complete withdrawal of included timber within a specified protection area.
- To satisfy requirements of the Prescribed Fire Programmatic Agreement III.B.2., cultural resource surveys will be conducted in areas of both high and low site potential soon after the prescribed burn. The post fire surveys allow assessment of effects from fire on cultural resources, identification of cultural resources previously hidden by thick vegetation, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the survey strategy.

### **Reasons for Categorical Exclusion**

I find the proposed action can be categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS because it fits category 31.2 (10), described in Forest Service Handbook ID 1909.15-2003-1, effective June 5, 2003.

10) Hazardous fuels reduction activities using prescribed fire, not to exceed 4,500 acres, and mechanical methods for crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, and mowing, not to exceed 1,000 acres. Such activities:

- a. Shall be limited to areas;
  - (1) In wildland-urban interface; and
  - (2) Condition Classes 2 or 3 in Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III, outside the wildland-urban interface;

- b. Shall be identified through a collaborative framework as described in “A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and Environment 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan;”
- c. Shall be conducted consistent with agency and Department procedures and applicable land and resource management plans;
- d. Shall not be conducted in wilderness areas or impair the suitability of wilderness study areas for preservation as wilderness;
- e. Shall not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or the construction of new permanent roads or other new permanent infrastructure; and may include the sale of vegetative material if the primary purpose of the activity is hazardous fuels reduction.

I find the proposed action can be categorically excluded because there were no extraordinary circumstances identified by the interdisciplinary team of resource scientists that analyzed this proposal.

### **Public Involvement**

This proposal was first listed on the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests Schedule of Proposed Actions in January 2003. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during the scoping period, from March 26 to April 26, 2004, and was posted on the Forest web site. Private landowners within the project area were contacted and involved in the project planning process.

### **Findings Required by Other Laws**

This decision is consistent with the Routt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan 1997 Revision as required by the National Forest Management Act. The project was designed in conformance with Forest Plan standards and incorporates appropriate Forest Plan guidelines. The Proposed Action complies with other laws and regulations such as the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act.



## **Decision and Rationale**

It is my decision to proceed with this project in an effort to decrease fuel quantity and continuity, lessen fire behavior and intensities, and create defensible space between wildlands and rural home-sites in the vicinity of the NFSR 600 corridor. Treatments include approximately 309 acres of thinning, rollerchopping, thinning/aspen enhancement, strip piling and aspen burn.

## **Implementation Date**

This project will be implemented during field season of 2004 and 2005.

## **Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities**

This decision is not subject to administrative appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(f).

## **Contact Person**

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Terry DeLay, ID Team Leader, USDA Forest Service, PO Box 249, Saratoga WY 82331 or telephone 307-326-2518.

/s/ Richard N. Rine  
**Richard N. Rine**  
**Parks District Ranger**

August 6, 2004  
Date

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